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ABSTRACT

The report describes the settings of a case study of innovations in Burke County (North Carolina), provides a brief history of the county's educational efforts, and discusses some of the county's initiatives in education. For the research, multiple sources of data were used, including focus groups, interviews, and artifacts, such as memoranda and public-relations materials. Results indicate that the positive factors associated with the institutionalization of change were found across all these data sources. Some of the important elements in change included decentralizing the central office, planning, and starting small. Several factors contributed to success: maintaining focus once an initiative was under way, involving teachers in the planning and management of the innovation, and making a continual commitment to staff development. Communication and collaboration were also seen as important to the process, as were program support and followup. Administrative openness to innovation and the district's commitment to finding the necessary resources to continue initiatives likewise contributed to successful changes. (RJM)

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From the Middle of the Pack to the Top of the Heap:

A District's Odyssey Through the '90s

by

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INTRODUCTION

Berman (1981) has noted that the results of reform initiatives typically amount to a "noncumulative hodgepodge" (p. 253), being neither effective or systematic. Farrar, DeSantis, and Cohen (1980) found that once educational innovations were introduced in the schools they became a jumble of unresolved problems and competitive political values. The researchers likened innovation in the local school setting to a giant lawn party where there were random comings and goings and couplings and uncouplings. Orlich (1989) confirmed that confusion; he argued that educational reforms proposed by individuals and groups were contradictory in nature, poorly implemented, and eventually abandoned.

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Current research and theory state that the more positive factors in place for an educational innovation, the more likely that it will be incorporated. Among the positives frequently cited are administrative openness to innovation, faculty commitment to improvement, teacher involvement in the planning and management of the innovation, and availability of the resources necessary to implement the innovation (Huberman & Miles, 1984). The positives necessary for the incorporation of innovations provide the stimulus for this study.

THE SETTING

With 13,400 students, Burke County is the 25th largest out of 119 school systems in North Carolina. The system consists of 14 elementary schools, four middle schools, and two high schools. The student population is 83% Caucasian, eight percent African American, seven percent Asian,and two percent Hispanic. The majority of Asian and Hispanic students are Limited English Proficient. Additionally, there has been a 176% increase in the number of students classified as English Speakers of Other Languages over the last three school years. Approximately 34% of students receive free or reduced price lunch. The county is largely rural with isolated urban areas and is situated in the northwest portion of the state. The major employer in the county is state government with two prisons, two mental institutions, and other state facilities. Last year Burke County was rated by *Readers Digest* as one of the ten best places to live in the country.

A BRIEF HISTORY

At the end of the 1987/88 school, Burke County ranked 24th out of 134 districts in third grade reading. By the end of the 1990/91 school year, their ranking had slipped to 61st. As a result, a Blue Ribbon Committee was convened, in 1993, to assess the current state of education in Burke County. The committee noted the following about Burke County: "There are 121 school systems in North Carolina and our system seldom ranks in the top 25 in student classroom performance or academic outcomes and never in the top 10" and "large numbers, perhaps as many as several thousand of our system's children are off-grade level substantially without appropriate mastery of one or more basic subjects" (p.5, Burke County, 1993). Some of the committee's recommendations were to : 1) increase expectations and standards, 2) provide early assistance to children, 3) continue the class-size initiative, 4) implement specific strategies for at-risk students, and 5) implement strategies to reward teaching and improve the professional development of teachers and administrators.

This Blue Ribbon committee serves as a marker for the school system in the early to mid '90s. By the end of the 1995/96 school year, Burke County was ranked 12th, 19th, and 18th in reading in 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade, respectively. These rankings represent an average gain of 23 ranks over three school years. This improvement in rankings has occurred as educators in Burke County have implemented a number of reform initiatives. The implementation of these initiatives has spanned two superintendents, a reduction in central office staff

and a complete turnover of the school board over the past four years. Stated a Burke County principal, "I think we are not only innovative, but we are successful with innovations that we have attempted – small class size, technology, English as a Second Language, block scheduling, Senior Project. People consider western North Carolina rural, backward, and rather clannish. I think we have been progressive compared to other systems in the state. It helps having superintendents come in with a vision and a plan to move us forward." A brief summary of these innovations is provided below.

A SUMMARY OF BURKE COUNTY INITIATIVES

In the early 1990s, educational leaders realized that when their student achievement levels dropped, serious work needed to be done within the district. The reformers knew that any program that was started or continued had to be consistent with the philosophy and goals of the district, be educationally sound, and improve student achievement. Some educational initiatives begun in the late 80's were continued and expanded, others were developed and initiated in the early or mid 1990s. The following is a description of Burke County's primary initiatives.

Family Connections - Birth to Age Five

Family Connections was begun in the late 80's as a small program to assist families in educating young children. Throughout the years it has been consistently expanded and presently has four components. *Right Start* is a hospital-based, newborn parent support and education program designed to

promote positive parenting and child rearing responsibilities. *Parents as Teachers* offers monthly home visits by educators to assist parents in understanding the developmental needs of their children. Support networks include play groups and group meetings for parents. *The Family Resource Center* is a community linkage program that provides support to parents through a parent library, parent classes, adult education, and parent/child play opportunities. This program is housed in a converted school building located near the center of town. The final component – the *Pre-K Center* – provides early childhood educational experiences for young children.

Small Class Size - Primary Grades

In the early 90's a task force comprised of educators and community leaders studied the idea of reducing class size in primary grades to 15 students to improve student outcomes, particularly in the area of reading. The first year a small pilot was started in first grade classrooms in four elementary schools. The district provided staff development to participating teachers and monitored student outcomes. This initiative is now in all 14 elementary schools, grades one to three.

Reading Instruction for Teachers

New in his job as superintendent in 1994, Dr. Tony Stewart discovered that many of his elementary teachers did not know how to teach reading, having had little or no instruction in that area when they were in college. He forged an agreement with a local university and Burke County elementary teachers then attended a series of university-sponsored reading courses over a set period of

time. In the last few years, literacy specialists have been placed at elementary and middle schools, reading classes are available for all middle school students and a comprehensive reading remediation program is in place in the high schools.

The TORCH Program - Elementary Students

The TORCH program, begun almost eight years ago, is an intensive elementary pull-out remedial reading program for students who are not on grade level. The student works one-on-one with a teacher assistant on a regular basis until satisfactory progress in reading is made.

The Move to Middle School and Block Scheduling

In the early 90's with a new school building program gearing up, the district made the commitment to move from junior highs (grade 7-9) to middle schools (grades 6-8). Several years later the middle schools moved to block scheduling. In both cases, targeted staff development as reported by administrators took place to prepare faculties for these changes. (One of the high schools also moved to block scheduling and received staff development.)

Career Development - High School

At the high school level, a strong emphasis on career development for students emerged several years ago. As part of their secondary school experience, a job shadowing program was initiated for students. During the summer, selected teachers also job shadow to enable them to incorporate what they have learned out in the field into next year's lessons.

Senior Project - High School

Senior Project, a program for graduating seniors to demonstrate what they know and what they can do, was started in the two high schools two years ago. All twelfth graders must write research papers on an approved topics of their choice, develop projects or products related to their research, and present their findings before a review board comprised of community members and educators. The program is run through the English department.

METHODOLOGY

This case study explored one district's continued ability to make the process of change work to improve student outcomes. Multiple sources of data were used including focus groups with central office staff, principals, and teachers, individual interviews, and artifacts such as memoranda and public relations materials. These multiple data sources helped provide sufficient detail to describe and explore the process of school change.

FINDINGS

From the focus groups, interviews, and reviews of artifacts, several themes emerged. These were: 1) decentralizing central office/site-based decision-making, 2) planning and starting small, 3) staff development, 4) communication and collaboration, 5) maintaining focus/staying the course, and 6) program support and follow-up. These themes are discussed in the subsequent sections.

DECENTRALIZING CENTRAL OFFICE/SITE-BASED DECISION-MAKING

Principals mentioned repeatedly how trimming down central office staff and allowing schools to make their own decisions about personnel, budget, curriculum, and instruction had affected them. "I think there's a great deal of site-based leadership now. There's more control at the local school that comes with more accountability at the local school. " Remarked an elementary principal, "...Before, if you went into each elementary school it would be alike...We have changed and each school is doing what is best. We are beginning to see that reform come down." An administrator summed it up when she said, "It is making each school faculty plan and be accountable, but it gives them freedom, too. It does not matter how your reach your goals, but there are parameters involved. You get there the best way you know how, instead of calling it play-by-play which was done before."

PLANNING AND STARTING SMALL

Principals remarked that extensive research was done before any initiative was started. "We do the research. I know with small class size we did not jump into that quick. We studied, we looked at examples of programs. It was the same way with block scheduling. We made sure this was the way we wanted to go." Remarked the Family Connections director, "What we do is documented in research."

The initiatives in Burke County have one aspect in common - all were started on a small scale and subsequently scaled up. For example, the class-size initiative started in four schools and the TORCH program started in two schools. Regarding this aspect, a member of the central office staff stated: "We began slowly with pilots like with reduced class size, Senior Project, and block scheduling. We moved in cautiously to see what kind of support we had and what kind of support we needed." Principals supported this perspective. "With technology there were two schools that started and did the research and the background work. In the process they came up with suggestions and better ways to do things. Many of those suggestions were implemented when the other schools came on board." Administrators described the way student portfolios were introduced at the elementary level. "We began portfolios in certain schools and grade levels to allow us to decide how we wanted to do things and how to make it meaningful for students and teachers." A principal described how a pilot that ended in failure was still a beneficial experience for all involved. "Teachers at my elementary school were frustrated about social promotion and fact that so many students were not ready to move on. We started reading everything we could, did an ERIC search, and began visiting other schools. Two teachers at the same grade level said they wanted to try teaming together for instruction and I gave them my support. At the end of the year they came back said that the children were too young at this level for teaming and that they were going to discontinue the pilot after this year. I think you have to able to let people try

things out and give the freedom to do that. If it doesn't work, it is good that you tried it and that you shared what you found with others."

In conclusion when asked why they have used pilot-testing of the initiatives before implementing system-wide, Superintendent Stewart noted, "From my perspective, the air of caution and my experience and seeing how educators over the past years have just kind of jumped on every bandwagon that comes along and they don't know where it's going...I've seen too much of that and I've seen too many funds [and] resources wasted."

MAINTAINING FOCUS/STAYING THE COURSE

"Staying the course" is perhaps the biggest reason Burke County has been able to progress toward meeting its goals. Major initiatives are maintained and are not discarded when another popular reform has emerged. Remarked a principal, "You know students come first and I think we have really stayed focused on that. We don't jump every year to something new; we keep the same focus." For example, smaller class sizes and *Family Connections* have been in place for seven years. Superintendent Stewart called this the "Vince Lombardi" approach. Regarding focus, he stated:

> When you build a Super Bowl team, you can't build [it] by changing quarterbacks every year, changing offensive players, and you can't have a defensive and offensive coordinator in opposition. It has to be the teamwork and you have to focus on the basics. Once you master that, then you've got your Super Bowl team on the way...

A principal summed it up when he stated, "Dr. Stewart gives us a firm rudder to sail with or against the current depending on what the case may be...I think we are innovative, but with reason and common sense. That is the common denominator that is going to get us through."

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Another critical component of successful implementation of reform initiatives is a strong staff development component (Berman & McLaughlin, 1977). This component has been critical in many of Burke County's initiatives. As one teacher noted, "We had a lot of staff development to prepare us to move from junior highs to middle schools...A lot of people were very much afraid of change because it was a big change." Staff development included technology training, visiting other middle schools, and invited speakers. A principal noted that training for teachers was just one chunk of the pie. "When we moved from junior highs to middle schools the training was there. When we implemented small class size the research and the training were there, the same with technology and block scheduling. It is a package. You have to do it all."

In Burke County, staff development begins immediately with all beginning and new teachers who go through a comprehensive two-day inservice covering such aspects as teacher and student expectations and the North Carolina standard course of study. This focus on the curriculum was noted by one teacher who stated, "There's also a huge push in the curriculum. A huge difference in being more aware of what the state standard course of study is and what we need to do to meet those goals and objectives."

The recent reading initiative has had the following staff development components: graduate-level reading courses, reading strategies workshops, grade-level reading strategies, and basal reader strategic questions. One teacher commented on the importance of staff development: "Dr. Morris, Dr. Slagel, and Dr. Traythin came down here and taught the Reading Readiness graduate school classes. That helped a lot of first and second grade teachers at our school who didn't have a clue what they were doing until they took those classes."

While, overall, teachers were complimentary about the staff development provided by the school system, teachers noted either a lack of staff development or that staff development did not occur prior to implementing some programs. For example, one teacher expressed concern about the lack of staff development for the block scheduling initiative. Another example was inclusion. One teacher noted, "I saw it at our school with inclusion, which I think is a great idea but we started it with no staff development. She just stuck a teacher in there and there's two teachers in there and they've not been taught what to do and how to do it."

COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

Communication and collaboration was another theme which emerged from the focus groups and interviews. The director of the Family Connections program remarked that, "I can't think of any agency in town that we have not worked with – Department of Social Services, the Health Department, the police

department, the state early childhood program." She also noted that her program brought the community together.

Burke County educators felt communication to various stakeholders was a critical component in making progress and obtaining support. Said one central office staff member, "I think we do a fairly good job of letting the public know. We've got an annual report that lets the public know about the kids are performing...Schools consistently send in articles to the [local newspaper]. " Another staff member pointed out the benefits of providing information: "We've tried to be real honest and up front with people. If you don't give people information, they make up their own and they usually make up something that's not very positive."

Within the district, communication was paramount. "I think that there is a willingness and an openness to share, talk and ask questions among teachers and administrators in this district. We communicate very openly with one another," stated a principal. Another building administrator remarked that, "The principals are involved in the planning, the teachers are involved. When we all agree to do something, we have already bought into that issue. That is a good thing for our students."

Teachers also commented on communication issues. Their ability to express concerns is through mechanisms such as grade-level teams and school-based leadership teams. One teacher summed up the grade-level process in the following manner: "A lot of times we say our concerns first at the grade level. And the if we feel like as a group that we can't come up with a good response or

a good plan of action, we'll go to our principal. And then from the principal, if he or she cannot take care of that will go to the central office staff." Another discussed how the school leadership team tackled the issue of a adoption of a school-wide math program through teacher input and a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the math program and how it could best be implemented in the school.

PROGRAM SUPPORT AND FOLLOW-UP

Follow-up and support are critical elements in reform initiatives (Achilles & Young, 1983). Regarding the importance of follow-up, one central office staff member noted, "I can truly say that we now provide follow-up which has not been in place in Burke County until the most recent years. We continue to meet with our Senior Project teachers at least every semester and in the summer to find out how things are going." Programs like small class size and Family Connections are evaluated on a regular basis.

The focus on reading has resulted in the hiring of reading specialists and middle school reading teachers, the development of indicators and assessments, the creation of reading classes in middle school and remediation classes at the high school. One teacher commented on the helpfulness of the reading specialists, saying "I think the innovative programs the Burke County has brought as far as reading specialists has helped so much to add to your reduced class-size program because I think her ideas have been excellent tools for us to use. I

think that's one reason we see better readers coming from elementary school to middle school."

CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this case study of Burke County support previous findings regarding educational innovations. From the focus groups, interviews, and artifacts, the positive factors associated with the institutionalization of change were found across all these data sources. For example, administrative openness to innovation was best summarized by Superintendent Stewart who stated that he gave administrators "...the latitude to do the job...I think it's important in this whole thing of reform to let people be creative." Faculty commitment to improvement has been generated through piloting programs. One central office staff member stated, "I think the piloting helps [get] your constituents onboard much quicker because they have input from the very beginning where you are truing out a new idea to see if it's going to work." Teacher involvement was summed up by several teachers. One noted, "They're good about asking us, what do you want to know? What do you need to know?". The district's commitment to finding the necessary resources to continue initiatives was best summarized with the following comment from a central office staff member:

> You know we could have easily scrapped reduced class size two years after it started because we could say we just don't have the money for this. But instead of doing that, we looked at the merits of what had

happened...became very creative and gotten the funding we needed to go forward with it. We could have easily said staff development is important but our budget's been cut from almost a $1,000,000 to about $80,000 a year. We could have said we just don't have the money to do staff development. But instead of doing that...[we said] instead of spending thousands of dollars, we can do the same program locally, keep our teachers here, and do even better staff development with follow-up.

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